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# How to Love the Church: Breaking the Cycle of Co-Dependency

by Smuts van Rooyen

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I love the church. I'm moved within me when I say I love the church, and so are most of you. But some of us need healing from our love for the church. That may sound strange, but it is possible for us to love with such desperation that our love destroys us and harms the church. It becomes crucial to learn to love the church in a healthy way.

Let me tell you about my mother and my father. My dad lived in Rhodesia (which is now Zimbabwe). One day my father went out in the family's field and found his father dead, a native's spear pinning his right arm to his throat. It was so traumatic an experience for my dad that he left for South Africa. There he began to work in the mines. He would go underground before the sun came up. He would come up above ground after the sun was down. Basically, he lived a life of deep depression, and was soon into alcoholism.

My mother was a bright, supportive, ambitious woman. In our home town, she had her own fashion business. She made excellent clothes, was extremely creative, cooked great food, and was always the life of the party—a marvelous mother.

My father's drinking progressed into an addiction. The first symptom was his denial. He didn't have a problem, he said, because he hadn't missed one day of work for 25 years. He argued that a man who is working cannot possibly be an alcoholic. It

didn't matter that he came home every night stoned out of his head. He had been to work. Dad was caught up, of course, in the illness of denial. Denial is not a lie. It's just that the mind does not allow us to see what is truly painful.

As Dad was in denial a very interesting thing happened to my mom. She began to mimic Dad. When people would speak about Dad's drinking, her reaction was, "Well, you know he's a good husband. Oh, he oversteps the mark once in a while." She was also in denial.

Dad's tolerance for alcohol began to go up. He could drink a half jack of brandy every night. What would have killed other people, barely gave my dad a buzz. Every now and then Dad passed out, and we'd have to rush him to the hospital. He reached the point where what it took for him to get a buzz and what it would take to kill a man was very, very close. He was on the edge.

As Dad's tolerance for alcohol went up, so did Mom's tolerance for his bad behavior. Behavior that should have been utterly intolerable was accepted as perfectly normal. One night my brother and his girlfriend were sitting, kissing, in our living room. Dad came out of his room drunk, leaned right over them on the couch, and closed the windows behind them. He was stark naked. Mom's response—and ours—was to laugh about it. One morning, at five o'clock, Dad slipped in his own vomit and broke his arm. For weeks we teased him about his broken arm.

Dad tried to control his drinking. He said, "I'm no longer going to drink during the week. I'm going to drink only on the weekends, and I'm going to change from brandy to wine." He tried

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desperately to control his drinking, and Mom mimicked him. She frantically began trying to control Dad. She tried everything. One morning after a big argument, Mom ran outside with Dad's brandy and poured it out in the street. Later she'd insist, "You've got to come home at night right after work, and I'll pour your drinks for you." Dad was out of control, and as Mom tried to control him, she also spun out of control.

Occasionally Dad would stop drinking; then he'd have withdrawal problems. When Dad argued with Mom, and pulled away from her, she too would have withdrawal problems. She could not stand it if my father would not speak to her.

My father was preoccupied with his drinking; he would hide alcohol by putting it in a thermos flask, which he stashed in a World War II backpack propped in the closet. Just in case sometime he couldn't get a drink, he would know that it was there. His day was organized, not around work, not around the family, but around his drinking. A strange thing began to happen to Mom. Her day was also not organized around her work or her family; it was organized around Dad. As Dad was addicted to alcohol, Mom was addicted to Dad. As Dad became progressively worse, Mom, too, became progressively worse. Then came the time when Dad was so bad, he started to collapse morally. He slept around; he lied. And Mom lied to protect him. She even started to drink. When I was 12 she died of cirrhosis of the liver, 30 years before my father.

**I** have seen what love gone wrong can do. My mother's fundamental problem was that she loved my father in a way that enabled him to destroy himself. In the process, she destroyed herself. Anne Schaeff's book, *The Addictive Organization*, deals with the problem of how people working for big companies become addicted to the organization. As the company begins to do all kinds of harmful things, they just go along with it.

There was a time in my relationship to the church when no matter what the church did, it did nothing wrong; I couldn't even see it. I was in denial. As the church made more and more mis-

takes, my tolerance of them grew proportionately.

As the church began to lose some control of itself, I began to try to control the church. I recall a time when my main mission was to rescue Seventh-day Adventism. I truly believed there was no limit to the usefulness of one person devoting himself, committing himself, totally to the Work. I was certain I could get the church to see and do things my way, and in the process I lost control of myself.

In the past, I had a preoccupation with the church. My whole life—every single little angle of it—was tied up with religion. There was no secular part of my life at all. *Everything* was tied up with the church. My life did not revolve around family, my work, or others. Rather, my work and others all revolved around the church. It had become a central preoccupation, an obsession, an addiction. My love for the church had gone wrong and was threatening to destroy me.

This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout religious history, preoccupation with the church has been a problem. God gives the temple to Israel and he says, "I will be in your midst," and before long they are worshiping the temple, and not the God in the temple. Jeremiah says to them, "You say, 'The temple . . . the temple . . . the temple!' And you think that the temple will preserve you, no matter what. It won't!"

When Jesus came he said to the Hebrews, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you *think* you have eternal life. But they are they which testify of me." They were reading the Scriptures without seeing Jesus; they worshiped the Scripture and not the God of the Scripture. They were more enamored with the preciousness of the earthen vessel than with the treasure inside.

So, it is an old problem, this tendency of mine. It is a tendency that many people have—to focus on what is God-given, rather than on the God who gave it.

The issue remains: how do I love the church, but not more than the God who gave it to us? How am I to love the church in a healthy way? The church is not simply a human institution; the church is something that Christ instituted. I cannot imagine myself living as a Christian and not

being involved with the church. If Christ died for the church, how can I neglect it? But how do I love the church appropriately, in a way that encourages it to flourish and permits me to be healthy? How can I love the church without being addicted to it?

A partial answer is what I would do to help my mother. I would tell her to take responsibility for herself and to stop trying to change my father. I would say to her, "You have tied your health to Dad, and you need to get well regardless of what happens to Dad." I would say to her, "You have to differentiate." Differentiation means that you say, "I will be in a relationship with you, but the condition will be that I have input into the relationship. I will not get into a relationship where someone else lays down all of the terms of the relationship, where someone else determines *me*."

That was exactly what had happened to my mom. My dad determined her. The relationship was totally and wholly on his terms.

**I**t takes an enormous amount of strength to say, "I love you, Church. I will suffer for you, Church. But I will not let you determine me. I will not let you say, 'If you are going to have a relationship with me, here are the terms. You follow those terms, or else there is no relationship.' No. I will have some input into what that relationship is, and I will begin to insist on some of my own terms. We're going to have a bit of a stormy session, but ultimately it's going to help you and it's going to help me. If we're going to save this relationship, somebody has to be strong enough to say, 'I'm not simply going to let you tell me what to do.' What is more, I'm not going to let you decide unilaterally whether or not we have a relationship."

People say to me, "Smuts, you're not a Seventh-day Adventist, because you don't believe everything." And I say, "Who are you to decide whether or not I am a Seventh-day Adventist? I will decide whether or not I am a Seventh-day Adventist. It is my life. I know what I am. Who set you up in judgment over me? I know my heart, I know my loves, and I know I am a Seventh-day Adventist."

To differentiate means that you put a bit of space between you and the other person, but you remain sensitive to the other person's wants. Differentiation is not simply a matter of, "Hey, look, I have my own fulfillment to consider; I'm headed toward self-actualization, so forget you, friend. I'm going to self-actualize regardless of you." No. When you differentiate you put a space there, between you and the other person, but you also say, "What are your needs? What is it you want? I can bend here; I can make a concession there without feeling that I'm compromising. I am idealistic, but life is really a matter of trade-offs, and I'll make some trade-offs with you. I am going to stay in the relationship, and I'm going to be tough because I love you."

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**In a healthy relationship, there comes a time when you say to the church, "I love you, and I'm staying in the relationship, but you will no longer control me by means of the fears that are within me."**

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That's the key: tough love. Not tough anger; that's easy. Tough love; that is hard. But I believe that ultimately that is what heals.

To differentiate is to discover the mechanism by which a person is controlling you, and defuse it. My dad controlled my mother because he was always threatening to leave. My mom was desperately afraid of being alone, and she would do anything to keep my dad, including destroying herself. I would have said to Mom, "Mom, you need to identify the mechanism by which Dad controls you, and have another look at it."

In my relationship to the church, the church had a mechanism by which it controlled me. It was central; it was crucial. Somehow, the church had convinced me that it was the agent of my salvation. And I will do *anything* to be saved. Somehow I believed that I could not be saved if I were not a Seventh-day Adventist. If you say

to the average Adventist, “Do you think you’re saved by the church?” the answer will be “No.” But if you ask, “Will you be saved if you leave the church?” it’s a different story. By saying this, I’m not saying that people ought to leave the church. All I’m saying is that if I believe that the church is responsible for my salvation, I am in a terrible position—I am in an impossible position. No matter what I’m asked to do, I will do, and I will be afraid of questioning.

But in a healthy relationship, there comes a time when you say to the church, “I love you, and I’m staying in the relationship, but you will no longer control me by means of the fears that are

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within me, because I have given up those fears.” It’s been a marvelous experience for me, to learn that the church in no way, shape, or form determines my salvation. I have been set free to love the church in a new way. It no longer is something I have to do—it’s something that I *want* to do. It’s as if I can now choose the church, whereas before I couldn’t choose the church.

In Acts, chapter 2, Luke says, “The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” Martin Luther saw that that text explained both the impotence and the value of the church. Catholicism turned the text on its head. It asserted, “The church added to the Lord daily such as should be saved.” In other words, the church was the mediator between Christ and the individual.

To which Luther said, “No! There is no mediator between Jesus and the individual. We are saved by Jesus.” Then he added, “But, Christ brings those people to the church.” Indeed, Luther loved the church. Because he did he said “No” to the church. That “No” rescued his relationship to the church—made him free to truly love the church. And that “No” transformed the church—freed it to be more genuinely the church.

Now my mom could never do what Luther did: challenge the authority, and say No to it. My mom wouldn’t think or act for herself. Dad did all the thinking. People who are alcoholic, especially men, often control others by means of intimidation. My dad would growl, and my mom would cower. She wouldn’t even think of opposing him.

I’ve learned very well from my mom. I’ve grown up as a co-dependant. I’ve found that, at times, my relationship to the church has been very much that of an addicted person. It is possible to have an addiction to a chemical substance, to work, to sex, to gambling, to food, even to an organization. I love the church, but I have had to face the challenge of redefining my love for the church.

The Scripture establishes a healthy tension between the church and the believer. On the one hand it gives the church the right to teach—its great commission is to teach all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). The commission is not to legislate belief, but to persuade, to teach. On the other hand, the believer is given the right to question what the church teaches. When the prophets speak, the believers are to “weigh carefully what is said” (1 Corinthians 14:29).

The believer has the right to question not only the church but even to question God. Job, David, Paul, Jesus—all questioned God. And he allowed it. Now I ask you, if the believer can question God, can he not question the church? Is the church greater than God?

You know, one of the marvelous things about the Adventist community is that it is so able to question. People say Adventism is a cult. Well, there may be cultish things about Adventism, but a cult is not filled with people questioning. I am grateful that Adventism has encouraged the teaching office of the church. I have been deeply blessed through the years as the church has taught me. I have grown, I have gotten insights. I have learned. But I also came to see that I have to have freedom, to say as a Christian, as an Adventist, “Sorry, I don’t see it your way.” I wish I could. It would make my life a lot easier. There are certain things I have come to believe that I sometimes wish I didn’t believe, but I do.

Ultimately, in the judgment, I will stand before God and he will not ask me, "Smuts, what did the church teach you?" God will ask me, "Smuts, what did you do with your mind as you interacted with the Scripture, and with the church, and with others?" And I will have to answer for myself. I have to assume responsibility for me. To give that responsibility to someone else is to put myself and the church in grave peril.

When we look at the church we often go to two extremes. One is to say it is divine. If so, we should

bow down and worship it. The other extreme is to say that the church is only human, just an organization of people making decisions that we all know to be fallible. Both extremes are wrong. The church is a divine event that occurs when Christ appears within our corporate humanity.

What we need at this time is to give up our sickness that masquerades as love. Give up that illness that destroys individuality, the mind, even love itself. What we need to find again is the mature, perfect love that casts out all fear.